With net and turkey neck in hand

Youths In Search Of Knowledge - And Supper

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During July, in which Cancer is the prevailing astrological sign, it's only fitting to seek the crab, the animal whose symbol is the ruling constellation.

For most who make this search, however, the motivation isn't astronomical, but gastronomical, as the blue crabs rank with crawfish and shrimp as a Louisiana seafood lover's delight.

Sometimes for the amateur crabber, harvesting these sea creatures can be as enjoyable as consuming the crop. A group of Acadiana youths recently made this discovery as they visited the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge in Cameron Parish, one of the state's more abundant suppliers of the Callinectes (beautiful swimmer) sapidus.

Following an afternoon of crab orientation at the Acadiana Park Nature Station by natural sciences curator Kip Crighton, the fifth and sixth graders could recite the stages of their prey's development from molting through megalops. They learned how to distinguish sexes (live males have blue-tipped claws, those of the female are orange), also the abdomen of a male is "F" shaped, while the female's is rounded) and, of course, the best crabbing techniques.

So with nets, string and bail in hand, the entourage set out with one goal in mind—filling their ice chests with that night's dinner.

While many of the voyagers had previously crabbeted at least once, for a few it was a Callinectes initiation. Nonetheless, even the most experienced greeted their first catch like it was the J.T.

The procedure seemed simple enough—tying a turkey neck onto a six-to-ten-foot length of string and casting it out, then slowly pulling it in when a nibble is detected. One young psychic swore on the slightest movement of the string that "You've got somethin', I'm sure this time." He often misjudged the currents.

Still, the crabs were biting at this site and kept their pursuers busy. After the victim is lured within reach of a waiting net, the crabber or a partner scoops under it, hoping to trap the au gramin fixings in a web. This step proved to be the most demanding for the overanxious youths; those who were quiet and calm had the most success.

Once seized, the crammers faced the challenge of getting their captives into a basket by merely flipping the net and shaking it over the target. (Crabs will live out of water for a considerable period of time if they are kept cool and moist with plenty of air.) If they missed, most (few were not so bold) were able to pick up the live crab—by lightly stepping on it to keep it in place and grasping it by the back fin close to the body.

The crew kept it at it for over three hours and managed to bring in about a dozen crabs each, to be steamed or boiled. A feast of lump, flake, and claw meat can be extracted from the crabs which contain half the calories of a round steak, yet nearly as much protein. That kind of dividend more than makes up for the two-hour drive to the marshes on the Gulf of Mexico.

Meanwhile, the kids have had an adventure away from the television screen to add to their summer vacation. Crabbing is usually best during the warmer months and the public can crab at Rockefeller any time, once a permit has been obtained from a Wildlife and Fisheries office. Also, the Nature Station day camp (July 26-30) for 10-12 year olds will be making a visit to the refuge.

Crabmeat cravers can find the product in markets all around town, but to really appreciate this delicacy, a trip to the marshes is a must.

The prize: A big Callinectes sapidus

Instructor Kip Crighton gives tips on tying on the bail